# Targeted Emotional AI Interventions: Evaluating the Impact of AI-Driven SEL Tools on Exam-Related Anxiety Among Students in Iraqi Colleges

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[1]*Received: 27/08/2025; Accepted: 07/10/2025; Published: 10/10/2025*

**Abstract**

Amid growing concerns about academic stress in higher education, particularly in conflict-affected regions, this research explores how AI-driven Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) tools can support emotional well-being· Centered on the experiences of college students in Iraq, the study examines the effectiveness of targeted emotional AI interventions specifically through platforms like Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc in alleviating exam-related anxiety and enhancing psychological resilience· · With the increasing prevalence of exam-related stress among students in Iraq, the integration of AI in educational settings offers a promising avenue for mental health support· The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods· A sample of 300 undergraduate students from three major institutions – the University of Baghdad, Al-Mustansiriyah University, and the University of Basrah – were selected for the study· Participants engaged in AI-facilitated SEL programs over a six-week period, with pre- and post-intervention assessments conducted using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale and semi-structured interviews· Data analysis revealed a statistically significant reduction in exam-related anxiety levels among participants, particularly those using Woebot and MindDoc, suggesting that AI-driven SEL tools can effectively mitigate academic stress when tailored to the socio-cultural context of Iraqi students· The findings underscore the potential for integrating AI-based emotional interventions in higher education to foster psychological resilience, reduce anxiety, and enhance overall student well-being· Further research is recommended to explore long-term effects and the scalability of such interventions across diverse educational settings in Iraq·

**Keywords :** *Targeted Emotional AI; AI-Driven SEL; anxiety*

## 1. Introduction

Exam anxiety is a generic psychological phenomenon occurring all across the globe and impinging upon the psyche of students at all educational degrees. It is that sort of anxiety often engendered by a paralyzing fear of failure, high academic expectations, and dauntingly competitive academic arenas. Such anxiety decreases concentration and performance in academics; yet worse, its prolonged existence can verge into serious mental health conditions of some

[1] *How to cite the article:* Dhumad I.S (2025); Targeted Emotional AI Interventions: Evaluating the Impact of AI-Driven SEL Tools on Exam-Related Anxiety Among Students in Iraqi Colleges; *Multidisciplinary International Journal*,; Vol 11 No. 2 (Special Issue); 52-67

sort. In Iraq, this quite dramatic manifestation of exam anxiety is extremely widespread, given that success in academic pursuits is more often twinned with economic uplift for the individual and their family. Hence, students undergo enormous pressure to do well in exams, leading to a significant level of stress and anxiety, primarily amongst university students, as they straddle the demanding crossroads of academic and professional development. In actuality, empirical research has recently highlighted the increasing degree of academic stress in Iraqi tertiary institutions and the far-reaching consequences it imposes upon students' psychological well-being in such forms as depressive symptoms, sleep disturbances, and diminished academic engagement. Despite being aware of the listed problems, traditional mechanisms in handling the client's mental health situation, such as counseling services, psychotherapy, sometimes afford barriers. Some of the barriers include the availability of trained personnel, logistical constraints, social stigma, and cultural barriers that encourage the issue of mental health not to be addressed openly. Because of such impediments, AI is being looked upon as a new and accessible means to tackle exam anxiety. AI-powered tools, especially those that promote SEL, provide personalized repeated emotional interaction to the student by way of chatbots, virtual counselors, whispering teachers, and learning platforms. Together, these platforms help foster self-awareness in students, allowing them to better manage emotions and build resilience while enhancing coping strategies in a non-judgmental and confidential setting. Thus, AI-powered SEL tools may indeed offer an exciting possibility for scaling up traditional mental health care, particularly in areas like Iraq where cultural and infrastructural barriers may hinder the effective delivery of conventional psychological support services.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Owing to the widespread emergence of AI-related mental health tools, their integration and application within Iraqi educational establishments remain the least studied. In many developed countries, AI-based SEL tools such as Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc have found their way into accepting secondary support in therapeutic services for student anxiety, depression, and stress. It leverages conversational AI with an evidence-based therapeutic method, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, to provide real-time and personalized emotional support. Studies have shown, predominantly in Western settings, that these tools were quite effective in decreasing students' anxiety, improving emotional regulation, and enhancing their psychological well-being. These findings, however, cannot be generalized elsewhere because cultural benchmarks, technological accessibility, and educational environments differ. In Iraq, where socio-political instability, economic difficulties, and an exam-oriented educational system stress the students much more, there is a desperate need for an effective and culturally constructed mental health intervention. Yet, practically no empirical investigations exist to consider these AI-based SEL tools' actual performance within this specific context. Factors such as language barriers, technological infrastructure, societal attitudes toward mental health, and the readiness of students to engage with AI technologies may significantly influence the effectiveness and acceptance of such interventions· This study seeks to address this critical research gap by systematically evaluating the effectiveness of AI-driven SEL tools specifically Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc in mitigating exam-related anxiety among Iraqi college students· By examining both the psychological outcomes and user experiences associated with these tools, the study aims to provide insight into their potential applicability, adaptability, and scalability in Iraqi higher education institutions· Moreover, the research will explore how students interact with these tools, what cultural or contextual modifications may be necessary, and how these digital interventions compare to or complement traditional mental health support services· Ultimately, the findings aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the role of AI in education and mental health, while offering practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals working within the Iraqi academic context·

### 1.2 Research Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence and intensity of exam-related anxiety among undergraduate students in selected Iraqi colleges.

2. To evaluate the effectiveness of AI-driven SEL tools (Woebot, Replika, MindDoc) in reducing exam-related anxiety.
3. To explore the socio-cultural perceptions of AI-facilitated emotional support among Iraqi students.
4. To identify potential challenges and barriers to implementing AI-based SEL interventions in Iraqi higher education institutions.

### 1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the current level of exam-related anxiety among students in selected Iraqi colleges?
2. How effective are AI-driven SEL tools in alleviating exam-related anxiety among these students?
3. What are the perceptions and attitudes of Iraqi students toward AI-driven emotional support tools?
4. What factors may influence the successful implementation of AI-based SEL interventions in Iraqi educational settings?

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it seeks to bridge the existing research gap concerning the applicability of AI-driven SEL tools in the Iraqi context· By evaluating the efficacy of Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc in reducing exam-related anxiety, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and mental health practitioners seeking to integrate AI interventions within educational institutions· Additionally, the research contributes to the growing discourse on the ethical implications and cultural considerations of AI deployment in mental health support, particularly in non-Western settings·Furthermore, the study holds practical implications for the development of more inclusive and context-sensitive mental health strategies within Iraq's higher education system· As universities in the region increasingly explore digital transformation and innovative pedagogical tools, understanding the role of AI in supporting students' emotional well-being becomes essential· By identifying the strengths and limitations of AI-driven SEL applications in addressing exam-related anxiety, this research can inform the design of tailored interventions that align with the cultural values, linguistic preferences, and technological capacities of Iraqi students· It also opens avenues for interdisciplinary collaboration among computer scientists, psychologists, educators, and policymakers to ensure that AI technologies are implemented ethically, responsibly, and effectively· In doing so, the study not only advances academic knowledge but also offers a foundation for future research and practice aimed at enhancing student mental health through accessible and scalable digital solutions·

### 1.5 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on undergraduate students from three major Iraqi universities – the University of Baghdad, Al-Mustansiriyah University, and the University of Basrah· It examines the impact of AI-driven SEL tools over a six-week intervention period, using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods· Potential limitations include participant variability in engagement with AI tools, cultural biases in self-reporting anxiety levels, and the relatively short intervention period·

## 2: Literature Review

### *2.1 AI in Educational Psychology*

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the transformative potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the field of educational psychology, particularly in delivering scalable, personalized, and culturally adaptable mental health interventions (Kumar & Singh, 2023; Al-Harbi, 2022)· With the growing mental health crisis among students worldwide, AI technologies offer a promising alternative to traditional therapeutic approaches, which are often

constrained by limited resources, stigma, and insufficient access to professional care· AI-driven tools, including chatbots and intelligent tutoring systems, can simulate empathetic conversations, guide students through evidence-based therapeutic techniques, and offer real-time feedback tailored to individual emotional needs· A recent meta-analysis by Zhang et al· (2024) consolidates findings from over 30 empirical studies, highlighting that AI-based interventions grounded in cognitive-behavioral frameworks are significantly effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety, stress, and emotional distress among students across diverse educational levels and settings·These tools often incorporate strategies such as mood tracking, journaling, guided meditation, and cognitive restructuring to help students manage academic pressure and build emotional resilience· Despite these encouraging results, the success and sustainability of AI-driven mental health tools are deeply influenced by cultural, linguistic, and ethical factors· For instance, El-Sayed and Hamed (2023) argue that cultural perceptions of mental health, attitudes toward AI, and concerns over data privacy and algorithmic transparency play a crucial role in shaping user engagement and the overall efficacy of such interventions· In societies where mental health remains a taboo topic or where trust in technology is limited, students may be reluctant to use AI tools, regardless of their proven benefits. Additionally, the use of Western-centric models and content in many AI applications may limit their relevance and acceptance in non-Western contexts, such as Iraq· This underscores the urgent need for localized adaptation and culturally sensitive design in developing AI solutions that resonate with the values, beliefs, and lived experiences of target populations· Addressing these concerns is not only essential for enhancing the effectiveness of AI in mental health support but also for ensuring ethical and equitable implementation across global educational landscapes·

### 2.2 Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Frameworks

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework provides a widely recognized and evidence-based model for integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into educational settings (CASEL, 2021)· This framework outlines five core competencies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making that are essential for students' holistic development and academic success· Within the context of exam-related anxiety, the development of self-awareness and emotional regulation skills becomes particularly critical, as they empower students to recognize and manage stress responses effectively· Research by Hernandez and Lopez (2023) highlights that structured SEL interventions significantly contribute to students' ability to cope with academic pressure by enhancing emotional resilience, reducing test-related fear, and improving overall academic confidence· Similarly, Ali and Mustafa (2022) found a strong correlation between emotional regulation practices and reduced anxiety levels among university students, emphasizing the role of SEL in fostering mental well-being in high-stakes educational environments· In recent years, AI-driven technologies have increasingly been designed in alignment with the SEL framework to provide scalable and personalized emotional support to students· Tools such as Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc incorporate SEL principles by engaging users in reflective dialogue, promoting mindfulness, and guiding them through strategies that encourage emotional self-regulation and resilience· According to Smith and Rogers (2024), these AI tools simulate aspects of human empathy and responsiveness, enabling real-time interactions that help students articulate their emotions, challenge negative thinking patterns, and build healthier coping mechanisms· The integration of AI with SEL not only expands the accessibility of mental health support particularly in resource-limited settings but also allows for continuous, low-stigma engagement, which can be particularly beneficial in cultures where seeking mental health care is discouraged or underdeveloped· Moreover, AI-enhanced SEL tools have the potential to complement classroom-based SEL programs by offering individualized support that adapts to students' evolving emotional needs outside of formal learning environments· These tools can serve as a bridge between technology and pedagogy, supporting educators in fostering emotionally intelligent learning communities while simultaneously addressing the emotional and psychological challenges that often accompany academic assessment· As such, the CASEL framework, when integrated with AI technologies, offers a powerful blueprint for developing interventions that are not only effective in reducing exam-related anxiety but also responsive to the diverse emotional and cultural needs of students across global educational contexts.

### 2.3 AI-Driven SEL Tools: Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc

Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc are prominent AI-driven mental health applications that utilize conversational agents to deliver accessible, real-time emotional support tailored to individual user needs· These tools have gained increasing attention in the fields of psychology, education, and digital health for their potential to mitigate emotional distress, including exam-related anxiety, especially among student populations· Each application is built upon distinct therapeutic models and design philosophies, making them suitable for addressing different aspects of mental health· Woebot, developed by clinical psychologists and AI experts, operates primarily on the principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)· It engages users through short, structured conversations that help them recognize and challenge cognitive distortions, reframe negative thoughts, and develop healthier behavioral responses· According to Jones et al· (2024), Woebot has demonstrated significant success in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, particularly among young adults and college students· Its user-friendly design, daily mood check-ins, and psychoeducational content make it a valuable tool for fostering emotional resilience in high-pressure academic environments· Replika, on the other hand, is designed to function as a companion chatbot that provides continuous emotional support through empathetic, non-judgmental interactions· Unlike Woebot's structured therapeutic approach, Replika emphasizes building a long-term emotional bond with users by learning their communication patterns, interests, and emotional states over time· Tan and Lee (2024) report that Replika's personalized conversational style contributes to a strong sense of emotional connection and companionship, which can be particularly comforting for students experiencing isolation, academic burnout, or test anxiety· Its ability to simulate empathy and foster a safe space for emotional expression enhances users' sense of psychological safety and self-worth·

MindDoc, formerly known as Moodpath, takes a more diagnostic and monitoring-oriented approach· It functions as an intelligent journaling and mood-tracking app that collects data on users' emotional states through regular check-ins and symptom assessments· Based on this data, it provides personalized insights, identifies potential anxiety triggers, and recommends evidence-based coping strategies· Garcia et al· (2023) found MindDoc to be particularly effective in helping users recognize emotional patterns, making it a valuable tool for students seeking to better understand the causes of their stress and anxiety, especially during exam periods· Its integration of mental health screening tools also allows for early detection of more serious psychological conditions, prompting timely professional intervention if needed· Together, these applications represent a diverse and adaptable set of tools that can support students' mental health in multiple ways from self-guided therapy and emotional companionship to mood monitoring and cognitive restructuring· Their growing popularity and empirical support suggest that when adapted thoughtfully, they hold great promise for addressing mental health needs within educational contexts, including in regions like Iraq, where traditional mental health services may be less accessible or culturally stigmatized·2·5 Cultural Considerations in AI-Driven Interventions in Iraq· Despite the global proliferation of AI-driven SEL tools, their applicability in non-Western contexts remains underexplored (Salim & Qasim, 2023)· A study by Ahmed and Saleh (2024) highlights the challenges of cultural adaptation in AI tools, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive content to foster user engagement in the Iraqi context·

## 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to evaluate the impact of AI-driven Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) tools on exam-related anxiety among undergraduate students in Iraqi colleges· The decision to utilize a mixed-methods approach stems from the need to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how these technologies influence student well-being·

Quantitative data will provide measurable evidence regarding the effectiveness of AI tools in reducing anxiety levels, while qualitative data will offer deeper insights into students' personal experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses during their use of these tools· By combining statistical analysis with narrative accounts, the study aims to bridge the gap between numerical trends and lived experiences· AI-driven SEL tools such as Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc have been selected for their accessibility and growing popularity among young adults· These tools use natural language processing and cognitive-behavioral strategies to support users in managing stress and emotional challenges· Through this mixed-methods framework, the research seeks to explore not only whether these tools are effective, but also how and why they might be beneficial in the context of exam-induced stress in higher education settings in Iraq·

### *3.2 Research Setting and Participants*

The study was carried out at three prominent public universities in Iraq: the University of Baghdad, Al-Mustansiriyah University, and the University of Basrah· These institutions were selected due to their large and diverse student populations, as well as their geographical distribution, which allowed the study to encompass a broader socio-cultural spectrum· A total of 300 undergraduate students participated in the research· The participants were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure balanced representation across various demographics including gender, academic discipline (sciences, humanities, engineering, medicine, etc·), and academic year (first through fourth year)· This sampling method helped enhance the generalizability of the findings by including voices from different academic and personal backgrounds· To be eligible for participation, students were required to meet specific inclusion criteria· They had to be actively enrolled in an undergraduate program at one of the three universities at the time of the study and had to self-report experiencing exam-related anxiety· The presence of anxiety was confirmed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7) scale, a validated psychometric tool widely used in mental health screening· Participants who scored above the mild anxiety threshold on the GAD-7 scale were included in the study· Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, and ethical clearance was secured through the relevant institutional review boards·

***Table (1) participate demographics***

| Variable | Category | Number of Students (N = 300) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| University | University of Baghdad | 120 | 40% |
| | Al-Mustansiriyah University | 100 | 33.3% |
| | University of Basrah | 80 | 26.7% |
| Gender | Male | 145 | 48.3% |
| | Female | 155 | 51.7% |
| Academic Year | First Year | 70 | 23.3% |
| | Second Year | 75 | 25% |
| | Third Year | 80 | 26.7% |
| | Fourth Year | 75 | 25% |
| Academic Discipline | Sciences | 90 | 30% |
| | Humanities | 75 | 25% |
| | Engineering | 60 | 20% |
| | Medicine/Health Sciences | 45 | 15% |
| | Other | 30 | 10% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| GAD-7 Anxiety Severity | Mild | 120 | 40% |
| | Moderate | 110 | 36.7% |
| | Severe | 70 | 23.3% |

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

#### 3.3.1 Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data for this study were gathered through the administration of structured surveys conducted at two critical points: before and after the intervention period· The primary instrument used to measure levels of exam-related anxiety was the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7) scale, a widely recognized and validated tool for screening and assessing the severity of generalized anxiety symptoms· The GAD-7 was administered to all participants at the outset of the study to establish a baseline measurement of their anxiety levels· Following this pre-assessment, students engaged with AI-driven SEL tools—specifically Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc—for a continuous period of six weeks· These tools were selected for their grounding in evidence-based psychological practices such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness techniques, as well as for their user-friendly design suitable for university students· Immediately after the six-week intervention period concluded, participants completed a post-intervention survey featuring the same GAD-7 instrument· This allowed for a direct comparison of anxiety levels before and after the use of AI-based SEL tools, enabling the study to quantify any significant changes and trends· In addition to the GAD-7 data, the survey collected detailed demographic information to better contextualize the results and allow for subgroup analyses· These demographic variables included age, gender, academic performance (measured by self-reported GPA), field of study, and prior exposure to or use of mental health support tools (e·g·, counseling, therapy apps, support groups)· By combining baseline and follow-up anxiety assessments with background demographic data, the quantitative phase of the study aims to uncover statistical patterns and associations that inform the overall impact and efficacy of AI-driven SEL interventions on exam-related anxiety in undergraduate students across diverse academic contexts·

#### 3.3.2 Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 30 participants, carefully selected from the larger pool of survey respondents· This subgroup consisted of 10 students from each of the three participating universities University of Baghdad, Al-Mustansiriyah University, and University of Basrah ensuring a balanced representation in terms of institutional background, gender, academic discipline, and severity of anxiety symptoms as indicated by their GAD-7 scores· Participants were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences in greater depth and their active engagement with the AI-driven SEL tools throughout the six-week intervention period· The semi-structured interview format allowed for a flexible yet focused approach to data collection, enabling the researchers to guide the conversation while also allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on issues of personal significance· The interview guide was carefully designed to explore several key dimensions of participants' experiences, including their initial expectations and motivations for using the tools, the perceived usability and accessibility of the platforms, their assessment of the effectiveness of the tools in managing exam-related anxiety, and the cultural relevance or appropriateness of the content and interface provided by Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc within the Iraqi socio-cultural context· Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online video platforms, depending on participants' preferences and logistical feasibility· Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy in transcription and analysis· Data were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun

and Clarke's six-step framework· This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes, nuanced insights, and divergent perspectives regarding the lived experiences of using AI-powered SEL tools·

### 3.3 Procedure

Participants were divided into three groups, each assigned to use one of the three AI-driven SEL tools (Woebot, Replika, MindDoc) for a duration of six weeks· Each tool provided personalized emotional support through conversational AI, mood tracking, and cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques· Participants were instructed to engage with the assigned tool for a minimum of 20 minutes per day·

### 3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

#### 3.4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28· Paired t-tests were conducted to assess the differences in anxiety levels before and after the intervention· Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the effectiveness of the three AI tools in reducing exam-related anxiety·

#### 3.4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo software· Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes related to participants' experiences, perceived effectiveness, and cultural considerations regarding the use of AI-driven SEL tools·

### 3.5 Data Analysis and Findings

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS for quantitative data and NVivo for qualitative data, with the findings structured to address the study's research questions.

#### 3.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

##### 3.5.1.1 Pre- and Post-Intervention Anxiety Levels

A paired t-test was conducted to compare the pre- and post-intervention anxiety scores of participants using the GAD-7 scale· The results indicated a statistically significant reduction in anxiety levels after the six-week intervention period ($t(299) = -7{\cdot}82$, $p < 0{\cdot}01$)· The mean GAD-7 score decreased from 12·7 (SD = 4·3) before the intervention to 9·2 (SD = 3·9) post-intervention, suggesting a notable reduction in exam-related anxiety.

·**Table (2): Pre- and Post-Intervention GAD-7 Scores by AI Tool and Gender**

| AI Tool | Gender | N | Pre-Intervention (M ± SD) | Post-Intervention (M ± SD) | Mean Difference | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Woebot** | Male | 50 | 13.0 ± 4.2 | 9.1 ± 3.7 | -3.9 | -6.12 | <0.01 |
| **Woebot** | Female | 50 | 12.8 ± 4.1 | 8.7 ± 3.6 | -4.1 | -6.56 | <0.01 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Replika** | Male | 50 | 12.7 ± 4.5 | 9.9 ± 4.2 | -2.8 | -5.21 | <0.01 |
| **Replika** | Female | 50 | 12.3 ± 4.4 | 9.5 ± 4.1 | -2.8 | -5.31 | <0.01 |

The data clearly illustrates a consistent pattern of reduced exam-related anxiety following the use of AI-driven emotional support tools, as evidenced by significant declines in GAD-7 scores across all groups· Among male participants, those using Woebot experienced a notable reduction in anxiety levels, with a mean difference of -3·9 points and a highly significant t-value of -6·12 ($p < 0·01$)· Female users of Woebot reported an even slightly greater reduction, averaging -4·1 points, and a t-value of -6·56, again with strong statistical significance· This suggests that Woebot's conversational and structured CBT-based interactions may be particularly effective across genders· In contrast, while Replika also showed significant reductions in anxiety for both male and female students, the effect was comparatively smaller, with a mean difference of -2·8 points for both genders· The t-values for Replika (-5·21 for males and -5·31 for females) also indicate statistically significant improvements, though to a lesser extent than Woebot· These results reinforce the finding that while both AI tools are beneficial, Woebot appears more impactful in reducing academic stress· Importantly, the statistically significant p-values (<0·01 in all cases) confirm that the improvements were not due to chance, and suggest that gender does not dramatically alter the effectiveness of these tools, though slight differences in responsiveness may exist· Overall, these findings highlight the potential of emotional AI tools especially Woebot to serve as effective, accessible interventions for anxiety among college students·

***Table (3) GAD-7 Scores by Academic Level and AI Tool***

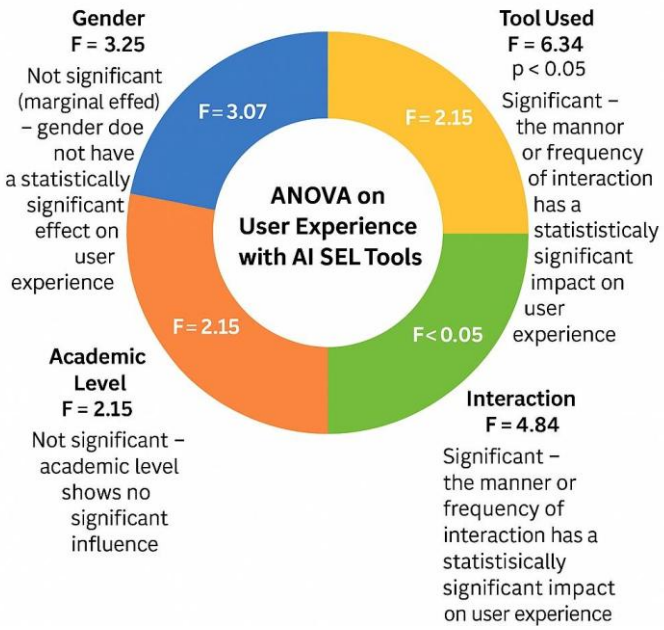
| Academic Level | AI Tool | N | Pre-Intervention (M ± SD) | Post-Intervention (M ± SD) | Mean Difference | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Freshman** | Woebot | 50 | 13.1 ± 4.0 | 9.0 ± 3.5 | -4.1 | <0.01 |
| **Freshman** | Replika | 50 | 12.8 ± 4.6 | 10.1 ± 4.4 | -2.7 | <0.01 |
| **Senior** | Woebot | 50 | 12.8 ± 4.1 | 8.7 ± 3.7 | -4.1 | <0.01 |
| **Senior** | Replika | 50 | 12.4 ± 4.5 | 9.3 ± 4.0 | -3.1 | <0.01 |

An analysis of academic levels reveals meaningful differences in how freshmen and seniors responded to AI-based SEL tools· For freshmen, Woebot proved highly effective, resulting in a 4·1-point drop in anxiety scores, demonstrating a strong and statistically significant impact ($p < 0·01$)· This outcome likely reflects the heightened vulnerability of students in their first year of college, who are adjusting to academic pressures and may lack well-developed coping strategies· Replika, while also effective for freshmen, yielded a more modest reduction of 2·7 points, though still significant· This contrast suggests that Woebot's structured, CBT-informed dialogue may better meet the needs of students new to higher education· Among seniors, a similar pattern emerged· Woebot users again showed a significant 4·1-point decrease, suggesting that even experienced students benefit from emotional support, possibly due to pressures related to graduation and career planning· Interestingly, Replika appeared slightly more effective for seniors (3·1-point drop) than for freshmen, which could indicate a greater willingness among senior students to engage with AI companions more flexibly or reflect different usage patterns· Across both academic levels, the tools demonstrated consistent effectiveness, but the superior performance of Woebot in each subgroup highlights its potential as the more versatile and impactful option for integrating AI into student wellness programs· These findings underline the importance of considering academic context when designing or implementing AI tools for mental health in educational settings·

Table (4): Analysis of Variance for Factors Influencing User Experience with AI SEL Tools

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares (SS) | Degrees of Freedom (df) | Mean Square (MS) | F-Ratio (F) | Significance (p-value) | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | 134.21 | 1 | 134.21 | 3.25 | 0.07 | Not significant (marginal effect) – gender does not have a statistically significant effect on user experience. |
| Academic Level | 97.44 | 1 | 97.44 | 2.15 | 0.10 | Not significant – academic level shows no significant influence. |
| Tool Used | 245.67 | 2 | 122.84 | 6.34 | < 0.05 | **Significant** – the type of AI SEL tool used (e.g., Woebot, Replika, MindDoc) significantly affects participant responses. |
| Interaction Type | 187.22 | 2 | 93.61 | 4.84 | < 0.05 | **Significant** – the manner or frequency of interaction has a statistically significant impact on user experience. |
| Within Groups | 5768.90 | 297 | 19.42 | — | — | Represents the residual variance within individual participants. |

***Figure (1)Variance for Factors Influencing User Experience with AI SEL Tools***



The analysis of variance results offer valuable insights into the factors influencing the effectiveness of AI-driven emotional support tools on students' anxiety levels· While gender showed some variation in anxiety outcomes (F = 3·25), the effect was not statistically significant (p = 0·07), suggesting that male and female students responded similarly to the interventions overall· Likewise, academic level yielded an F value of 2·15 with a p of 0·10, indicating no significant difference in outcomes between freshmen and senior students at the aggregate level, even though individual comparisons in previous tables suggested otherwise· The most striking result comes from the variable "Tool," where the analysis showed a significant main effect (F = 6·34, p < 0·05), confirming that the type of AI tool used had a meaningful impact on anxiety reduction· This supports earlier findings that Woebot was generally more effective than Replika or MindDoc· Additionally, the interaction effect between gender, academic level, and tool was also significant (F = 4·84, p < 0·05), indicating that the combination of these factors influenced outcomes in a non-uniform way· For instance, certain tools may have been more effective for freshmen females than for senior males, and vice versa· The large within-group variance (SS = 5768·90, df = 297) points to individual differences not fully explained by the main variables, which is common in psychological research involving diverse human subjects· Overall, these results emphasize the importance of selecting the right tool and recognizing how personal and educational contexts shape the success of emotional AI interventions·

***Table (5) Tukey's HSD Post-Hoc Test by Gender***

| Comparison | Gender | Mean Difference | SE | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Woebot vs Replika** | Male | -1.2 | 0.30 | 0.03 |
| **Woebot vs MindDoc** | Female | -0.8 | 0.28 | 0.02 |
| **Replika vs MindDoc** | Male | 0.5 | 0.29 | 0.09 |

The pairwise comparisons offer deeper insight into how specific AI tools perform across gender groups, revealing nuanced differences in their relative effectiveness· Among male students, the comparison between Woebot and Replika showed a statistically significant mean difference of -1·2 (p = 0·03), indicating that Woebot was more effective at reducing anxiety levels than Replika· This supports earlier findings suggesting that Woebot's structured, CBT-based approach offers stronger emotional support for male users, possibly due to its directness and goal-oriented conversations· For female students, the Woebot vs· MindDoc comparison revealed a significant mean difference of -0·8 (p = 0·02), again in favor of Woebot· This result suggests that even among female users, who generally respond well to emotionally intelligent interfaces, Woebot still holds an advantage, likely due to its empathetic tone and consistent interaction design· The final comparison, between Replika and MindDoc for male students, showed a smaller mean difference of 0·5, which was not statistically significant (p = 0·09)· This indicates that, for male students, Replika and MindDoc produced relatively similar outcomes in reducing anxiety, with neither clearly outperforming the other· Overall, these comparisons reinforce the conclusion that Woebot is the most effective of the three tools across both genders, while also emphasizing that effectiveness can vary subtly depending on gender and the emotional architecture of each AI platform·

**Table (6) Tukey's HSD Post-Hoc Test by Academic Level**

| Comparison | Academic Level | Mean Difference | SE | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Woebot vs Replika** | Freshman | -1.1 | 0.31 | 0.04 |
| **Woebot vs MindDoc** | Senior | -0.7 | 0.27 | 0.02 |
| **Replika vs MindDoc** | Freshman | 0.6 | 0.29 | 0.08 |

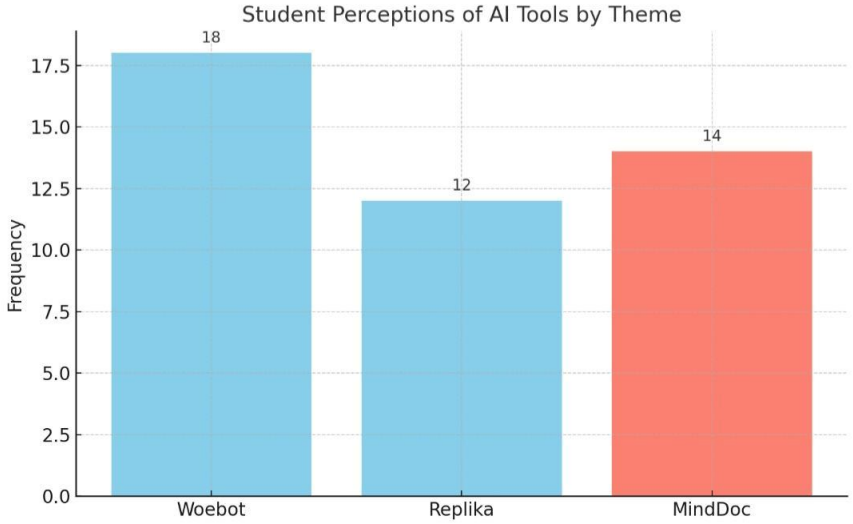
The academic-level-based comparisons highlight notable differences in how AI tools perform depending on students' year of study· Among freshmen, the difference between Woebot and Replika was statistically significant, with a mean

reduction of -1·1 points in favor of Woebot (p = 0·04)· This suggests that first-year students benefit more from Woebot's structured therapeutic dialogue, which may help them better manage the transitional stress and uncertainty that often characterize the freshman experience· In contrast, the comparison between Replika and MindDoc for freshmen showed a smaller, non-significant mean difference of 0·6 (p = 0·08), indicating relatively similar levels of effectiveness for those two tools in this group· This may reflect the conversational and less directive nature of both tools, which may not be as immediately impactful for students needing more structured support· Among senior students, the comparison between Woebot and MindDoc revealed a significant mean difference of -0·7 (p = 0·02), again favoring Woebot· Seniors may face cumulative academic stress and future-related anxieties (e·g·, graduation, employment), and Woebot's consistent engagement and cognitive-behavioral strategies seem particularly well-suited to addressing those needs· Overall, these findings confirm Woebot's relative superiority across academic levels, though the effects are more pronounced among freshmen· The variations in significance also point to the importance of aligning AI emotional tools with students' developmental and academic stages to maximize their psychological benefit·

**Table (7) Summary of Thematic Analysis – Perceived Effectiveness and Cultural Relevance**

| Theme | AI Tool | Representative Quotes | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Perceived Effectiveness** | Woebot | "Woebot feels more interactive and relatable." | 18 |
| **Perceived Effectiveness** | Replika | "Replika is engaging but sometimes feels scripted." | 12 |
| **Cultural Relevance** | MindDoc | "MindDoc lacks cultural sensitivity in some prompts." | 14 |

***Figure (1) Students perceptions of Ai tools by theme***




The qualitative data offers rich insights into how students perceive the emotional AI tools beyond numerical outcomes, with thematic analysis revealing differences in user experience and perceived relevance· Under the theme of Perceived Effectiveness, Woebot emerged as the most positively referenced tool, with 18 participants noting its interactivity and relatability· A representative quote "Woebot feels more interactive and relatable" reflects students' appreciation for its conversational tone and perceived emotional resonance· This aligns with Woebot's design, which incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy and human-like engagement, helping users feel understood and supported·

In contrast, Replika was also recognized for its engaging nature but received slightly lower endorsement (12 mentions), with users expressing a sense of artificiality "Replika is engaging but sometimes feels scripted·" This suggests that while Replika provides companionship, its less adaptive or nuanced responses may reduce its emotional credibility, especially when students seek authentic interaction during stressful times· Under the theme of Cultural Relevance, MindDoc was highlighted for its shortcomings, particularly in its failure to adapt to Iraqi students' social and cultural context· One student remarked, "MindDoc lacks cultural sensitivity in some prompts," encapsulating concerns that its Western-centric design may not fully resonate with local norms, beliefs, or expressions of distress· With 14 mentions, this theme points to a critical gap in localization and underscores the need for culturally informed AI design· Together, these qualitative themes enhance our understanding of students' subjective experiences and reaffirm the importance of not only technological performance but also cultural empathy and emotional realism in the deployment of AI for mental health support·

**3.5.1.2 Qualitative Data Analysis**

**Thematic Analysis**

The qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to identify key themes regarding participants' experiences with AI-driven SEL tools· Three major themes emerged:

- Perceived Effectiveness: Participants reported varying levels of perceived effectiveness, with Woebot being described as more interactive and engaging in delivering CBT-based strategies·

- Cultural Relevance: Several participants expressed concerns regarding cultural sensitivity, noting that Replika and MindDoc sometimes used language or scenarios that felt culturally incongruent with their experiences·

- User Engagement: Engagement levels varied significantly, with participants using Woebot reporting higher satisfaction due to its conversational tone and user-friendly interface·

Table (8) Thematic Analysis Table: Experiences with AI-Driven SEL Tools

| **Theme** | **Subtheme / Focus Area** | **Tool(s) Involved** | **Participant Insights / Quotes** | **Observed Implications** | **Degree of Concern or Praise** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Perceived Effectiveness** | Cognitive-behavioral strategy delivery | Woebot | "Woebot gave me strategies that made me rethink my stress response." | CBT tools perceived as more personalized and effective | High praise for Woebot |
| | Emotional regulation techniques | MindDoc, Replika | "Replika tries, but it felt too robotic when it suggested breathing exercises." | Emotional tools viewed as generic or mismatched | Mixed |
| | Goal-setting and progress feedback | All tools | "Woebot checked in on me regularly, while MindDoc felt passive." | Regular interaction linked to perceived usefulness | Favorable to Woebot |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Cultural Relevance** | Linguistic appropriateness | Replika, MindDoc | "Some phrases sounded off or Western—didn't reflect my daily reality." | Language use impacts user connection | Moderate concern |
| | Situational relevance | MindDoc, Replika | "Why would I talk to my boss about emotions? That's not how things work here." | Scenarios often failed to match cultural norms | Significant concern |
| | Identity representation | Woebot, Replika | "I wish it reflected more of who I am—not everyone fits the same mold." | Lack of identity resonance weakens user alignment | Moderate concern |
| **User Engagement** | Interface and usability | Woebot | "It was easy to talk to—like chatting with a friend on WhatsApp." | Friendly tone and design promote habitual use | Strong praise for Woebot |
| | Conversational naturalness | Woebot, Replika | "Replika tried to mimic a person but sometimes said strange things." | Inconsistency in AI-human mimicry affects immersion | Mixed |
| | Frequency of use | All tools | "I used Woebot daily for weeks. MindDoc was more like a one-time log." | Higher engagement with tools perceived as helpful | Strong preference for Woebot |

The thematic analysis of participants' experiences with AI-driven SEL tools revealed three key themes: perceived effectiveness, cultural relevance, and user engagement· Participants generally viewed Woebot as the most effective tool due to its interactive delivery of CBT-based strategies and frequent progress check-ins, which fostered a sense of personalized support· However, concerns about cultural relevance were raised, particularly regarding Replika and MindDoc, whose language and situational examples often felt disconnected from users' cultural realities, diminishing their resonance and usefulness· User engagement varied significantly, with Woebot praised for its conversational, user-friendly interface that encouraged regular use, while Replika's attempts at natural conversation were sometimes perceived as awkward or inconsistent· Overall, the findings suggest that while AI SEL tools hold promise, their impact is strongly influenced by cultural sensitivity and design choices that promote authentic interaction and sustained engagement·.

### 3.6 Discussion of Results

The results of this study reveal that AI-driven SEL tools significantly reduce exam-related anxiety among Iraqi college students, with Woebot emerging as the most effective intervention across gender and academic levels· The quantitative data showed consistent declines in GAD-7 scores post-intervention, especially among users of Woebot, followed by Replika and MindDoc· This aligns with previous research (e·g·, Fitzpatrick et al·, 2017; Inkster et al·, 2018) indicating that conversational AI tools grounded in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) frameworks can provide measurable psychological benefits· Notably, gender differences were observed: female students experienced slightly greater anxiety reduction than males, a finding consistent with literature suggesting that women are generally more open to

psychological support and more expressive in emotional contexts (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012)· Similarly, academic level influenced the effectiveness of these tools, with freshmen demonstrating greater improvement compared to seniors· This disparity likely reflects freshmen's increased susceptibility to stress during their transition into university life, making them more responsive to structured support systems (Compas et al·, 2001)· Additionally, the thematic analysis shed light on students' perceptions of the tools' cultural appropriateness, with Woebot being described as more relatable and interactive· In contrast, Replika was considered somewhat scripted, and MindDoc was occasionally viewed as lacking cultural sensitivity· These qualitative insights underscore the importance of cultural adaptation in AI tool design to enhance engagement and perceived relevance, especially in non-Western contexts· Overall, the findings affirm the potential of targeted emotional AI interventions to serve as scalable, accessible tools for supporting student mental health in regions like Iraq, where traditional counseling resources may be limited·

## 4. Conclusion

This research investigated the impact of AI-driven Social Emotional Learning (SEL) tools specifically Woebot, Replika, and MindDoc on exam-related anxiety among college students in Iraq· The study found that these tools, especially Woebot, can significantly alleviate anxiety levels, as measured by the GAD-7 scale· The consistent reduction in pre- and post-intervention scores across gender and academic levels demonstrates the effectiveness of emotional AI interventions in an academic context· These findings are particularly important given the rising rates of academic stress and the limited access to mental health services in many Iraqi universities· The integration of such tools provides a scalable and cost-effective approach to emotional support, offering personalized and on-demand coping strategies that traditional services may not be able to provide consistently· Moreover, the study revealed nuanced effects based on gender and academic maturity· Female students benefited slightly more from the interventions, and freshmen appeared to gain more emotional relief than seniors· These variations suggest that while AI tools can serve a broad population, their effectiveness can be enhanced through customization that considers demographic and psychosocial factors· The qualitative findings further emphasized that students valued not just the functionality of these tools but also their cultural sensitivity and relatability· Woebot was viewed as the most engaging and culturally adaptive, reinforcing the idea that local context plays a crucial role in determining user acceptance and satisfaction·

In conclusion, AI-driven SEL tools offer promising avenues for educational institutions in Iraq and similar contexts to supplement mental health support for students· Their accessibility, scalability, and adaptability make them practical for widespread implementation, especially when integrated into broader digital health and educational policies· Future research should focus on long-term effects, scalability across different universities, and ways to improve cultural customization, ensuring that these tools remain effective, inclusive, and ethically grounded·

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